

# THE CHANGING FACE OF GAME LAW ENFORCEMENT

Five female game wardens talk about how they got into wildlife law enforcement, what the work entails, and why they can't imagine doing anything else.

BY TOM DICKSON

Kqyn Kuka didn't see herself operating heavy machinery for the rest of her days. In 2006, the recent college graduate was working on a ranch when she impulsively picked up a phone and called the Fish, Wildlife & Parks headquarters in Helena. "Basically, I said, 'I'm lost. I don't know what to do with my life,'" says Kuka. Her call was transferred to the Enforcement Division Recreation Program, where Kuka learned that a water safety officer position had recently opened. "After hearing about my experience and education, they said I might qualify, so I faxed them my resume."

After spending a summer checking life jacket and boating equipment compliance as a water safety officer and ex-officio game warden, Kuka (whose first name is pronounced *quinn*) decided she wanted to be the real deal. "I'd be out on the water working with the wardens, and they'd get a call and tell me, 'We have to go handle a bear or work on a poaching case.' I really wanted to go along and do that."

She got her wish. Now based in Conrad, the FWP game warden defends wildlife against poaching and enforces other game

law infractions, meets with landowners, and carries out dozens of other conservation law enforcement duties. "I get to see so many beautiful places and meet interesting people every day," she says. "This is such a great job. I can't imagine doing anything else."

Kuka is one of five female game wardens now working for FWP. They are part of a female contingency comprising roughly 12 percent of law enforcement officers nationwide, up from 2 percent in the 1970s, according to the California-based Center for Law Enforcement Training. Jim Kropp, chief of the FWP Enforcement Division, says that for years the department had only one female warden but has hired four in the past two years. Though the five still represent just 7 percent of the state's 70 wardens, Kropp says they are beginning to change the face of game law enforcement in Montana. "Law enforcement has been undergoing changes nationally, and we've seen this reflected through more women applying to be wardens," he says. "We think that's great. These recent candidates went through our tough hiring process and ended up at the front of the pack. More women in our ranks is a sign of the times, and one we in the Enforcement Division and the agency as a



★ Warden Kqyn Kuka on patrol in her Conrad district. FWP recently hired Kuka and three other women wardens, a substantial increase from just a few years ago. "It's a sign of the times that we welcome," says Jim Kropp, Enforcement Division chief.

DARRIN SCHREDER/WENDT



★ Kuka listens to a bird hunter: “I really like it when they tell me their stories.”

whole welcome and embrace. It’s tough work being a game warden. We’re proud of everyone who casts their lot with us to protect Montana’s wild resources.”

#### RIGHT AT HOME

Kuka grew up in Great Falls, the daughter of nationally renowned American Indian painter King Kuka. After attending several colleges and earning her B.S. in environmental studies, Kuka found herself in a position familiar to many people in their mid-20s. “I had no idea what to do with my life,” she says. “All I knew is that I wanted to be outside, that I loved Montana’s natural resources, and I liked working with people.”

Those qualifications, along with her four-year degree and proficiency in written and oral exams, earned Kuka a shot at becoming a game warden, a position she attained in September 2007. By chance, FWP has stationed her in a district that includes her father’s childhood stomping grounds on the south border of the Blackfeet Reservation. An uncle lives in nearby Valier, and the local sheriff is also a relative. “I feel right at home here,” she says.

Kuka says she has been surprised so much of her job entails talking to people. “A lot of it is about developing relationships. I can’t be everywhere, so I need people in the community to be my eyes and ears. The only way that can happen is to build their trust.” That comes easy to the 28-year-old game warden.

“I enjoy talking, and listening. I really like it when anglers and hunters tell me their stories.”

Kuka says she regularly runs into hunters surprised at her gender. “I pull up in the truck and they say ‘Oh, you’re a girl.’ But once you talk to them, then they start just accepting you for who you are.”

Being a game warden and a mom, with daughters 8 and 3, hasn’t kept Kuka from enjoying the outdoors during her time off. She killed her first elk last year, and the year before that shot her first buck—while her older daughter watched and her 9-month-old rode in a backpack.

#### PERFECT FIT

Jen Williams, a warden in Bozeman, got her first look at conservation enforcement work right out of college. After earning her B.S. in wildlife management at Montana State University, she landed a technician job at the FWP wildlife laboratory in Bozeman. “I liked the forensics work. Determining the cause of death of an animal from start to finish is intriguing.”

Williams grew up in Great Falls, camping, fishing, and hiking with her family. Law enforcement was a familiar occupation: Her grandfather was a highway patrolman. “He worked all over the state, and I’d see how he was with people, open and friendly, and that always appealed to me.” Spending all day in a patrol car didn’t, however.

Having met many wardens and observing their work while in the wildlife lab, Williams decided to become a warden herself. She is now in her probationary year, which began last spring with a battery of tests. Like other new officers, Williams is constantly being coached and instructed. “The training officers and other wardens I work with are awesome,” she says. “Everyone here gets along so well and works so cooperatively.” In January, Williams will attend a 12-week basic course at the Montana Law Enforcement Academy, along with other new wardens, deputy sheriffs, city police officers, and highway patrol officers. Afterward she will continue her game warden training based in Bozeman.

Williams says she has been surprised by the diversity of game law enforcement work. “I do so many different things—hike, ride a horse into the backcountry, ride an ATV or snowmobile—whatever it takes to make good contacts. Wardens need to be in the field and maintain a visible presence.” Williams says that a few weeks earlier, she spent part of a day hiking into the Pintler Range to check anglers at two mountain lakes. “It was so beautiful and fun, and I was thinking, ‘I can’t believe this is my job.’”

Being a warden is a “perfect fit,” Williams adds. “I need to be doing something different all the time, I need to be outdoors a lot, and I need to interact with people. I love Montana and what we have here, and I wanted a job where I can help protect it.”

#### COMING FULL CIRCLE

Ann Engstrom has fulfilled her childhood dream of protecting wildlife in northeastern Montana. It just took a lot longer than she ever expected.

The 38-year-old Plentywood game warden grew up in a Sheridan County ranching family, hunting, fishing, riding in rodeos, and working on the farm. “I’ve been throwing hay bales since I was 12,” says Engstrom. In high school, she imagined someday working outdoors and protecting antelope, deer, and other wildlife from poachers. Life drew her in a different direction. After attending Montana State University for two years, she moved briefly to Wyoming and then to North Dakota, where she found herself raising horses and working in a small-town bank. “I looked around and thought, ‘I’ve got to get back to what I was originally interested in.’” After graduating from Minot State University with a B.S. in criminal justice, she returned to eastern Montana and was hired first as a deputy, then was appointed undersheriff for Sheridan County, where she worked for six years. “That’s when I reminded myself that originally I wanted to be a game warden, so when the opportunity came along, I applied.”

FWP hired Engstrom in June 2008 and stationed the new game warden in her home territory, where she intends to stay. She has two children—a son 18 and a daughter 10—as well as chickens, ducks, geese, dogs, and nine horses (“about eight more than I really

need”). In Plentywood she’s near childhood friends and her parents. “I have my roots here. Besides, I don’t know what I would do with the animals.”

Though she worked in law enforcement previously, Engstrom says being a game warden requires a different approach. “The main difference is that with the sheriff’s office, you are always reacting to someone doing something wrong. As a game warden, you’re much more proactive. You’re talking to hunters and anglers, making contacts, building trust with people who for the most part have the same interests you do—hunting, fishing, protecting the resource. It’s a whole different approach.”

Having previously worked in a male-dominated environment, Engstrom is used to the occasional smart remark from hunters and landowners. “I’m in a position that has historically been held by a man, and some people will comment on that. You learn to keep your chin up and just focus on the task at hand.”

#### WEST COAST TRANSPLANT

Britt Wallace grew up in Oregon but says she feels completely at home working in Montana as a game warden. “I love this state, and all my life I wanted more than anything to have a job protecting natural resources,” she says.

Wallace, who has a B.S. in recreational management from the University of Montana, arrived in Big Sky Country after working several years in other western states.

“I was a ski bum for a few years, trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life,” she says. While earning her degree in Missoula, she worked part-time at the front desk of the FWP regional office. She learned about the Enforcement Division’s Trainee Program for college juniors and seniors. “I thought the program sounded like a great idea, because it gives FWP the chance to see if you are a good fit for the job, and you get the chance to see if this is really what you want to do for a career,” says Wallace.

Now the FWP game warden in Livingston, Wallace says the job matches her skills, interests, and personality. “There’s great flexibility. You get to be outside. You deal with people all day long, which I like a lot. And you learn something new every day.”

In addition to rules, regulations, codes, seasons, and other law enforcement information, Wallace has been learning everything she can about wildlife. “I’ve had the opportunity to better understand how elk and deer behave, what type of habitat they prefer, and what they are eating,” she says. Since moving to Montana, Wallace has also begun hunting big game, an activity that likely will be greatly curtailed by her new duties. “As a warden, I’ll be working a lot during the hunting season, so I probably won’t have as many chances to go hunting as before.”

Wallace, who is 28, says working in an environment where most of her colleagues and citizen contacts are men is nothing new. “I’ve been a firefighter, ski patrol, and ski lift

★ Jen Williams on a backwoods patrol



★ Plentywood warden Ann Engstrom



★ Britt Wallace checks fishing licenses and life jacket compliance on the Big Hole River.



operator. I'm used to working in male-dominated fields."

**THE VETERAN**

Wendy Kamm began her career in Montana in 1982 as a U.S. Forest Service smoke-jumper based in Missoula. After four years of fighting fires and carrying 100 pounds of gear up mountainsides, Kamm looked for a different outdoors occupation. "I'd never thought about a career in law enforcement, but then I looked into being a game warden, and it looked like a good fit."

Kamm worked as a warden in Billings for one year then in Glendive for two more before moving to the Fort Benton district, where she has been stationed for 19 years. "My family was in the shipping business, so as a kid I lived all over the world. It's interesting that I've ended up in this small town in the middle of Montana. I like it here, the people and the pace of life."

Like other wardens, Kamm's job primarily entails "making contacts"—talking to

hunters, anglers, and landowners—while patrolling her 4,000-square-mile district to enforce trespass laws and game regulations. The 54-year-old warden is also a field training officer responsible for instructing newly hired game wardens, an emergency medical technician, and a hunter education instructor. In addition, Kamm teaches ice rescue to search-and-rescue crews across Montana.

Her favorite part of being a game warden is solving cases. "I like the mental challenge of puzzling out what happened," she says. "Maybe you get a call from a landowner about someone trespassing, and he gives you the license number. You check that and then ask around and maybe learn there are other previous violations involving other people. You make some calls, and investigate more. That's how you start to build a case."

Kamm says she tries to be fair and judicious when observing a violation. "I use discretion when it seems like there is genuine confusion about a law. But if I see premedi-

tation, opportunism, or failure to read the regulations, they get a ticket, and I sleep just fine, thank you. There's an attitude out there that all we want to do is write tickets. But we're trying to help people, protect public safety, and protect Montana's fish and wildlife. So when we have landowners and other hunters recognize that, and call us with information, that's really gratifying."

After working 22 years as a game warden, Kamm says she is disappointed to still meet people who don't pay her the same respect they do a male warden. "As a field training officer, when I'm out with a male trainee, hunters almost always will talk to him and not to me. So that's frustrating. But I just laugh it off."

As for FWP's four new women wardens, Kamm is optimistic about their chances of becoming top-notch wildlife enforcement professionals. "I think they will do really well. They're all well qualified and they understand what this job is about. I'm definitely pleased to see more women in enforcement." 🐾



**Wardens ask:  
"How are we doing?"**

Montanans rate FWP enforcement performance

**3. EFFECTIVENESS OF ENFORCEMENT TOOLS**

Respondents identified the relative efficacy of different ways wardens deter illegal activities. The highest ratings went to:

ENFORCEMENT TOOL CONSIDERED EFFECTIVE OR VERY EFFECTIVE	
Random patrols	93%
Issuing citations	91%
Issuing written warnings	88%
Using random game check stations	88%

Less effective tools cited by respondents were scheduled patrols and using traditional game check stations.

**VIOLATIONS**

FWP asked what people thought were the most common reasons for violating fish, wildlife, and parks laws. Fifty-eight percent of respondents answered that violations are most often due to an honest mistake or lack of knowledge regarding the law. Forty percent thought violators know the law but break it anyway when presented with the opportunity. Only 2 percent thought the most common reason was that people intentionally set out to violate the law.

Only 4 percent of the respondents thought violators are almost always caught, while 52 percent believed they are caught sometimes, and 44 percent said game law violators are hardly ever caught.

Jim Kropp, FWP Enforcement Division chief, says he and his staff are looking closely at these and other survey results. "What we take away from this is that Montana game wardens are considered professional, courteous, and fair by the vast majority of people they come into contact with," he says. "It's important to note that the the survey also shows that the public thinks we should continue emphasizing the enforcement of hunting and fishing rules and regulations as among our top duties, and that we should continue patrolling the field, especially using random patrols."

Kropp says several new game wardens have recently joined FWP, "and this survey will help us demonstrate to them the high standards of public responsiveness that we strive for." 🐾

In 2007, the FWP Enforcement Division set out for the first time to learn how Montana hunters, anglers, park users, and other recreationists view game wardens and the agency's game law enforcement program. "Wardens have more contact with more people in the field than anyone else in FWP," says Tom Flowers, a regional criminal investigator based in Choteau. Flowers produced the survey as part of a special project at Colorado State University for the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. "We wanted to know how people perceived their interactions with wardens, what their attitudes were toward wardens, and specific strengths we should build on or where we need improvement."

Flowers, working with public survey specialists in the FWP Responsive Management Unit, produced a questionnaire with 28 questions covering several general areas. The questionnaires were sent to 962 citizens who had previously been in contact with a game warden. A total of 554 surveys were completed and returned to FWP. Some results:

**1. IMPRESSIONS OF GAME WARDENS**

Overall, 92 percent of survey respondents viewed their experience in the field with a FWP warden as "positive" or "very positive." Respondents indicated they would rate the particular warden they met as:

	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
Professional	33%	61%
Courteous	29%	68%
Knowledgeable	34%	58%
Fair	32%	64%
Friendly	27%	71%

Eighty-three percent reported they thought FWP wardens overall are doing a "good" or "very good" job enforcing FWP laws and regulations.

**2. IMPORTANCE OF DUTIES**

Respondents rated the relative importance of current FWP warden duties:

**DUTY CONSIDERED IMPORTANT OR VERY IMPORTANT**

Enforce hunting rules/regulations	98%
Enforce fishing rules/regulations	95%
Enforce fishing access site rules/regulations	88%
Enforce state park rules/regulations	82%
Patrol during hunting season	95%
Patrol during fishing season	91%
Patrol at fishing access sites	83%
Patrol state parks	76%



★ Warden Wendy Kamm checks an angler's license on the Missouri River at Fort Benton.

